

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

A REVERSION TO TYPE

BY MORGAN ROBERTSON
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HE slipped off a ring and handed it to him. He pocketed it, and they were silent until he had helped her out of the auto and escorted her to her door. Then he said: "I will send you your letters and gifts tomorrow, Mabel. Good-by."

There was no relenting in her manner. She answered the good-by, and went in.

Howard dismissed his machine for the night, and walked down the street in a frame of mind he had never known before; to ease it he stopped at the first cafe. He felt better after a few moments, and at the next cafe the relief was still apparent, but shorter-lived. While here he scanned himself full length in a mirror. Effeminate, she had judged him? Was he? He was an athlete and he was some six feet of good looks and muscular development. His eyes were blue, his hair fair and curly, his skin pink as a girl's. Did these attributes constitute effeminacy?

"Effeminate! he banged," he mentally stormed. "I'm a man, if I'm anything." He went on with her indictment. Weak, lazy, selfish, heartless. He was not so fortunate in rebuttal. He had never worked because he had never needed to. Weak and lazy? Perhaps. Things had come to him without effort. He had not even tried very hard to win her regard. What he had received of it had come easily. Selfish and heartless? He had not so considered himself. No man had so judged him. This was a woman's verdict. Was she right? He took another drink, but this being the third, it brought no relief, only an aggravation of his mood.

He strolled into Broadway, boarded a trolley car, and here found a jolly party of slummers pour for Chinatown. He knew them and went along, with only his "Dutch courage" to keep him in spirit. This left him before a plate of chop suey, and, unable to get liquor in the place, quit the party to find it. He wandered east, stopping at one dingy dive after another, and what he absorbed rendered him utterly irresponsible. The last place he remembered was in Cherry Street, where his evening clothes made no little sensation among the loungers, and his next remembrance was of waking in a narrow apartment lined with bunks, in one of which he was lying—and listening to the profane shouts of men without. He was aboard ship.

He rolled out with an involuntary groan, for at the first movement his head ached. He was dressed, he learned, but in tarry, greasy rags. And in the bunk was a canvas bag of other rags, and a cap, which he appropriated. Stepping out on deck he found the vessel—a large, square-rigged craft—at anchor, with men aloft bending the canvas. Near the windlass, looking upward and chiding the workers after the gentle manner of the sea, was a tall, truculent individual with a red beard, who noticed Howard as he approached.

"Well," he remarked quietly, "you bilious-looking counter-jumper! Have you turned out? Get up aloft there, and help bend that topsail."

"Why should I?" answered Howard indignantly. "What am I doing here, anyhow?"

"What are you doing?" queried the mate—for Howard soon learned his status. "You're doing nothing at present, but, by Gawd, you'll do something pretty soon. Lay aloft, you dog."

He pounced upon Howard, but was suddenly shot back by the impulse of Howard's fist. Arising from the deck with a furious imprecation, he plunged his hand into his pocket and withdrew it brass-shod; then the combat was renewed, Howard fought coolly, intelligently, and with all the skill acquired in his athletic training; but skill and intelligence are of little avail against brass knuckles. An accidental slip on the smooth deck gave the mate an opening, and he laid open Howard's cheek bone. Then, dazed and whirling, he received another blow which made a two-inch gash in his forehead, and went down with darkening senses; but with the last flickering consciousness heard the words of his conqueror, standing over him:

"Thought you were a man, didn't you? Well, you're not, curse you."

When Howard came to he was again in his bunk, with his head tied up in cloths, and men were flocking into the fore-cabin. He rolled out and sat upon a chest, out was immediately asked to vacate it by the owner, and as there were no other empty chests or seats in the place, he crawled back into the bunk to pull himself together.

"You put up a good, stiff fight, matey," said the chest owner, as he reached for his dinner from the beef kid on the floor. "But what's the use? They'll do you in the end."

Howard felt of his aching wounds through the bandages.

"Brass knuckles. That's what you got. You'll know better next time."

"Perhaps. I'm not used to that kind of scrapping. What vessel is this, and where's she going? Anyone know how I got here? I don't."

"This craft," said the sailor, between mouthfuls, "is the ship Quickstep, of Bath, bound for Hongkong and back to an American port of discharge. As for you, you were very likely shanghaied to take the place of some fellow that jumped. You're no sailor-man, I can see that. No sailor-man slugs a bucko mate unless he's drunk. And you're dead sober."

"Sober now. Kidnaped, I suppose you mean. What's the chance of getting ashore?"

"None. We'll tow out when the tug comes. We've got the canvas nearly bent."

"Can't I go back in the tug?"

"Yes, if the skipper'll let you. Try that on, just once, if you like."

"Where is he—aft?"

"Better wait till he's had his dinner, and you've had yours. Then maybe you'll think better of it. Muster up here and get your whack, before it's gone."

Howard went out on deck and mounted the top-gallant fore-cabin for a look around.

Loitering in the alley on the high poop deck was a man whom Howard thought might be the captain, and he decided to interview him. He went aft and the man met him at the steps.

"Keep down off this poop," he said. "What do you want?"

"I want to see the captain. Are you the captain?"

"I'm the second mate. Say 'sir' to me when you cross my hawse, or I'll give you worse than the mate did."

"What's the matter here, Mr. Bellevue?" asked a stern voice behind them, and Howard turned to behold a man six foot six, if an inch, with a pair of shoulders like two coffee sacks, and arms as big as Howard's legs. He gripped him by the collar and held him at arm's length while he repeated the query.

"Are you the captain?" asked Howard, still at arm's length.

"Yes."



"I came aft to see you, sir, but was stopped by your second mate. I have been drugged and kidnaped—shanghaied, the men call it. I would like to get ashore. I am not a sailor, and did not ship in this craft."

"Can't help that. You were put aboard as one of a crew I bargained for, and here you stay. I'll make a sailor of you, all right."

"I will make it worth your while, captain. I am independent of money considerations, and can stand a good sum to be out of this fix."

"No, I've heard these yarns before. The papers are full of them. Every time a man has to explain his sudden disappearance he lays it onto some ship shanghaiing him. I can't delay to get another man. The tug'll be down soon."

"I will pay for the ship's delay. I guarantee to satisfy your owners. I have the money. I am well known in Wall Street. Please investigate."

"There's no time; and, another thing, I don't believe you. You're not a sailor, I can see; but wealthy men don't ship, drunk or sober."

"I admit I was drunk, and wandered into a strange neighborhood. But my clothes and money were taken. I am dressed in these rags by the thieves. If you will take the trouble, captain, you will not put me to this inconvenience."

"Go forward. That's all."

The captain shook him a little, just enough to make his neck crackle, and gently pushed him away. Howard arose from the deck about fifteen feet off, saw his broad back disappearing in the forward companion of the cabin, and the second mate climbing the poop steps, then went forward, turning with impotent rage. The men had finished their dinner and had lighted their pipes.

"How much per man," demanded Howard, as he took stock of the group, "do you fellows want to overpower those brutes aft and put me ashore?"

Derisive laughter answered him.

"I'll give you a thousand apiece. I've got it—on shore."

"Dot was too mooch," said a German. "I do it myself for a poog of tobacco. When you want me begin?"

"Look here, mate," said the chest owner seriously. "I know how you feel, and I believe you can back up your proposition; but we've signed articles, and what you ask is mutiny. Mutiny means certain jail, and if a man is killed, even on our side, it is hanging in all countries, for somebody. I've been aft in these packets and know both sides. Take my advice: sing small, work hard, and jump at Hongkong. The skipper'll give you every chance to jump, for he'll guess, because of the front you make, that there's a possible case against him. But its against a skipper's nature to give in to a man 'fore the mast. And if you raise any more trouble, there's a chance that you never reach Hongkong."

Howard again went out and climbed the fore-cabin steps. Not a craft of any kind was near enough to haul. But he noticed that the ship was swinging at her anchor, and that the flood tide was making. He went back to the men.

"Can anybody," he asked moodily, "accommodate me with a pencil, a piece of paper, and a bottle with a good cork?" They rummaged their bunks and bags, and the articles were produced. Howard wrote:

"Whoever finds this please deliver to John H. Fairman, 49 Wall Street, and receive a reward."

"Dear Fairman:

"Am shanghaied on board ship Quickstep, bound for Hongkong. Apparently no escape. Will try and get this to you by the tug. If fail, will throw bottle overboard. Reward bearer liberally. Fit out my yacht with armed force and a captain with nerve, and send her after this ship. Will stand any expense."

JOHN HOWARD."

"Does the tug come alongside?" he asked as he corked the note in the bottle.

"Not likely. She'll keep clear and throw us a heaving line," answered his adviser.

"I've written to my lawyer. I may swim for it, and I may get this bottle aboard the tug, or I may just drop it overboard. Somebody's going to sweat for this."

"Don't make it yourself. And don't let them see you toss the bottle. They'll want it back, and the tug captain might accommodate them."

"Why, haven't I right to notify my lawyer?"

"Your rights won't be considered. The fact that you've got a lawyer, and the possible chance of trouble, will make your life unsafe. Men like you are dropped overboard on these ships. Sing small, you fool."

"Turn to," roared the second mate at the fore-cabin door, and Howard, slipping the bottle into his trousers pocket, went on deck with the rest, pondering on what he had heard. The first mate appeared, divided the men into the original gangs, and sent them aloft to finish bending the lighter sails, then scanned Howard quizzically.

"Well, I guess you'd better stay on deck. Coil up all this gear, fore and aft, every rope you see. Coil each rope on its own pin."

Howard answered respectfully—for so far had his nautical education progressed—and began the task. It took him an hour, by which time a large tug was steaming up on the port quarter, the men coming

down, and his round of the deck had brought him to the port fore-rigging. Here he listened to the jovial badinage called back and forth between the captain of the ship and the captain of the tug.

"Not much chance of sympathy from that fellow," he muttered as he lifted his head over the rail and looked. The crew of the tug stood forward, one of them holding a coiled heaving line, and aboard the ship the men were flocking forward at the mate's behest to where a large hawser lay on the fore hatch with its end passed over the bows and back under the headgear. As the tug came abreast of the fore rigging, Howard mounted the rail, steadied himself by the lanyard, and carefully tossed the bottle. It struck the coil of heaving line held by the man and dropped on the rail without breaking. Then it rolled along it and seemed doubtful which way to fall.

"Catch that bottle and deliver the message in it," he called.

One of the men sprang toward it, but it eluded his fingers by an inch and fell overboard.

"Come down out of that," roared the mate from the fore-cabin deck. "What's in that bottle?"

"Message to my lawyer, if you want to know," answered Howard, sullenly, as he watched his bottle bobbing astern on the tide. The whirling heaving line from the tug attracted the mate's attention, however, and he busied himself with the passing out of the towline. But the captain came running forward, as Howard climbed down.

"What'd you throw aboard that tug?" he demanded, gripping Howard by the collar again.

"A message to—," Howard was being shaken vigorously, and good judgment was difficult—but he remembered the admonition of his adviser.

"A message to my brother, apprising him where I am," he stammered.

The mate came down and joined them.

"He told me a message to his lawyer," he said.

"Your lawyer?" queried the captain, squinting suspiciously at Howard. "Got a lawyer, have you?"

"I said my brother, sir. He's a plumber on Third Avenue."

"The bottle went overboard, anyhow, captain," said the mate.

"Hell of a rich man, you are—you and your lawyer and your plumber." He flung Howard from him and went aft; but the mate looked him up and down, seriously and thoughtfully, for a moment; then, as though satisfied with his conclusions, said: "Make the best of it. Be civil and quiet, and do what you're told, and you may come out all right."

As Howard was able to steer and box the compass from his yachting experience, he was kept at the wheel most of the day, and on lookout through all of his night watches on deck.

Standing at the wheel and on lookout is conducive to thought; and on this passage out Howard went into solid, searching thought into himself and his looks, of course, for the reason of his plight. He found it, first, in the last drink at the last dive he had entered; then, because he had left the party; then because he had joined it, and finally to his mood and the cause of the mood, his quarrel with Mabel Ross. And here the quest became of value. Aside from the charge of effeminacy he could not but admit that she was right, that he had been weak, lazy, careless, selfish, and heartless. And she had called him beautiful. He thought of the two red scars on his face that he would carry to his grave, and hoped that this judgment was overruled.

But it was a hard school he was going to. Wealthy, a yacht and horse owner, member of more clubs than he could name without effort, a petted, spoiled, good catch of metropolitan society, he was now a shanghaied foreman hand in a deep-water ship—worse, a farmer, a "soldier" who could not swab, scrub, paint, or run errands intelligently, the inferior of the meanest foreigner of the crew. But he learned a few things of value—to keep out of the way of moving objects, animate or inanimate; the minimum of deference which his different superiors forward and aft required to satisfy them; and he rapidly acquired an appreciation of the dry, subtle humor of fore-cabin discourse, and an acquaintance with the deep and genuine refinement of face and voice that comes to the roughest of men under extreme physical suffering.

In this frame of mind he was apprised one rainy day by the glances and gestures of his shipmates at work around the deck that something was coming up astern; and, on looking back, he beheld a sight that set his blood tingling. He knew her—knew every line, corner, and curve of that pet of his, and never since her builders had delivered her had she appeared so beautiful in his eyes. She came charging along, taut and trip, black, shiny, and graceful, her bow lifting and plunging, throwing spray over her bridge and carrying a "bone-in-the-teeth" three feet high, with the black smoke of forced draught belching from her funnel, and on her bridge a feature not put there by her builders, a vicious secondary gun, such as is carried by scouts and torpedo craft. Beside this gun stood a figure in a long, yellow oilskin coat and sou'wester, and near at hand, base down on the deck, a large megaphone, a new feature, like the gun.

The captain appeared on deck, and, lounging against the after house, inspected the yacht through his glasses. The first mate joined him, and they exchanged comments. Howard, drenched by the rain, chilled and aching from his long trick at the wheel, and excited by the prospect of release, stared badly. The mate noticed the discrepancy

between the compass course and the lubber's-point, and looked Howard in the face, but said nothing. The captain, however, looked at the compass just as the yacht had drawn within hailing distance, and berated him soundly. But the near proximity of that long, rifled gun had wrought a psychological change in Howard. He forgot that he was a shanghaied, thrashed, and conquered victim of circumstance, and remembered that he owned that big, fast yacht on the quarter, that every man on board of her was on his pay roll, and that, dollar for dollar, she was worth more than the ship. At times, such thoughts are helpful.

"You go straight to the devil," he answered. "I'm about through steering for you." Then he hailed the yacht.

"Yacht ahoy, come alongside and sink this ship if they prevent me leaving her."

"What?" thundered the captain, drawing back that mighty fist. But he did not launch it. Howard dropped the wheel, sprang toward him, and before the captain had realized that a sailor would dare assault him, he planted his fist in his solar plexus with a force that sent him reeling and gasping, momentarily deprived of breath, against the quarter bit.

"Lay aft, here, one man, to the wheel," called the mate; then, turning off Howard, he said, softly and intensely:

"Jump, jump quick."

But the captain was coming, and Howard mounted the house. Here, on a raised platform, was a chance that he could be seen and heard on board his yacht, and he could not yet assimilate the mate's attitude. The captain, red in the face with rage, followed Howard to the top of the house, and a man came running aft to the wheel, now held by the mate. The second mate came, too, but, at the sign of the mate's raised hand, forbore to join in the conflict.

"Quickstep, ahoy!" came a voice through the megaphone—a voice with the strange, woody, yet clarion tone that the megaphone gives to all voices. "You have on board that ship a man named John Howard. Produce him at once, or I will fire upon you."

Howard just caught a glimpse of the yellow-clad figure holding the megaphone; then his attention was taken by the wrathful skipper of the ship, who also paid no attention to the megaphone.

"Damn your heart and soul, you dog!" he belted. "You'll hit me, will you? Now, take it."

"Overboard with you, sir," called the mate. "Over you go. They're lowering a boat. Don't make 'em fire again. They sent that shot across the bow, but they'll hit us with the next. That fellow means business."

Howard looked around. The whole ship's company was demoralized, for merchant sailors are not accustomed to a gun fire.

The yacht was squarely abreast, and the yellow-clad figure was again poised the megaphone.

"Are you going to produce John Howard, or shall I fire again and again until I sink you?" came the voice through the megaphone.

"Don't fire," answered the mate. "He's coming." Then to Howard: "Now, Mr. Howard, jump. The boat will pick you up."

Howard, looking squarely at him, saw a twinkle in his eye.

"I knew at the first you were all right, Mr. Howard," said the officer, "and say—I take it back. You're a man, and you can do me when I haven't the knuckles. But jump, or they'll fire again."

"Thank you," said Howard. "I appreciate that compliment."

He stepped to the monkey rail, looked back at the prostrate form of the giant he had knocked out, then calling out a general good-by to the men, took the leap into the sea. It was a short swim to the oncoming boat; his men gathered him in, and pulled back to the gangway.

At the gangway the first mate welcomed him.

"Well, Mr. Smith, you came, didn't you?" said Howard, wringing his hand. "Where's the captain?"

"Very ill in his berth, Mr. Howard."

"Ill? What's the matter? Anything serious?"

"Nothing but nerves, I think, sir. Got to worrying over the consequences of stopping a ship on the high seas, and broke down."

"But I'm responsible. You got my bottle message, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir; Mr. Fairman got it, and referred the matter to us. He explained the situation to the skipper and me—piracy on the high seas. No one but a seaman can appreciate what that means. I weakened myself, sir, when it came to the pinch."

"You weakened. Then who had charge?"

"A passenger we brought along, sir. A friend of yours, I think."

"Where is he?" asked Howard, looking around.

"Down the after cabin, sir."

Then he followed with a second blow, just as a report rang out and the skipper, with closing eyes, went down.

Still dripping wet, Howard descended the companion, and stumbled over a long, yellow oilskin coat dripping its share of moisture on his velvet cabin carpet. Seated at the table, with head bowed, was a figure crowned with a yellow sou'wester. But it was not a harmonious picture—that figure, and face, and headdress. The sou'wester did not seem fitting, and correct, adorning the quivering head of a girl, shaking and collapsing in hysterics. And Howard only realized it when a flushed and embarrassed face looked up at him. It was Mabel Ross.

"Mabel!" he exclaimed. "How—why, was it you?"

"Oh, John," she said, as she struggled to her feet, "did I kill anyone? Has the ship sunk?"

"No," he answered, taking her in his arms; "you didn't hit her."

"But I aimed right at her." The girl's big eyes opened wide in protest and doubt.

"That is why," said Howard, smiling into the eyes, "that shot went across the bows. But Mabel, do you know what you are? You are a pirate, under the law. And so am I. We are likely to be hanged, or electrocuted, or imprisoned for life. I don't care."

"Neither do I," she answered.

But Howard did not take it. His schooling had reduced him to the Age of Stone, where conflicts are decided by the strongest beat, or tooth, or club, claw, or brain. And strongest of these attributes to him was the brain he was endowed with, and he used it. It was the greatest battle of his life. There were no brass knuckles with which to contend, nothing but the fist and grip of a giant; and he soon found that, by avoiding the last there was little to fear from her first. There was a clear space; his skill at boxing availed him; he dodged, feinted, advanced, and retreated, getting in an occasional blow on the square countenance of the skipper, and escaping, by quick contortions, his forceful lunges. Little by little he tired him out, and when he had him purple and panting, he assumed the offensive. He struck him once heavily on the jaw, and the skipper reeled, dazed and choked with rage to even curse him. Howard was momentarily deterred in the attack by the voice of the mate, shouting: "Hey, don't fire that gun! Wait a little." Then he followed with a second blow, just as a report rang out, and the skipper, with closing eyes, went down. Unmindful of the confusion following that shot, Howard sprang forward and stood over him, but the big skipper did not move.

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